

1. Buddha-Beads

“Beads”¹ is a string of little spheres made into a necklace, used for counting one’s devotional recitations. This necklace is however not worn for beautification - rather it is often held in the devotee’s hands. These beads are ‘counted’ while reciting a sentence. The practice of using beads for meditation is not spread only in Mahāyāna Buddhism, although there it is most famous. In Myanmar’s Theravāda Buddhism this tool became much spread and much appreciated too. Interestingly, it is not to be seen in Sri Lanka. Throughout four years that I spent in Sri Lanka, I’ve never seen a Sinhalese person to use beads during meditation.

In Myanmar, beads are used only for one meditation practice – reflecting on qualities of the Buddha, so called *Buddhānussati*. There are nine qualities of the Buddha, as mentioned in the *Buddha Guṇa*² recital, an important part of (perhaps) every Buddhist evening chanting, and also in the *Dhajagga Sutta* (*SN 1.11.1.3. Dhajagga Sutta*)³ which is also commonly included in weekly chanting. Because the qualities are nine, the ‘garland’ of rosary beads contains a multiple of nine – most commonly 108 beads, but simple nine-beaded rosaries are also common. There is however always one more bead included which has often hair sticking out, making the actual bead-count in the long rosary 109, and in the small one 10.



“Hundred-and-Eight” Rosaries in a shop near Mingun Pagoda (Sagaing Region)



“Nine” Rosaries made of various materials in Mandalay Hill and near Mingun Pagoda

¹ In Mahāyāna tradition “*mālā*”, also called “rosary beads”, “Buddhist prayer beads”, etc. See more information in the Wikipedia article - https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Prayer_beads .

² <http://www.dhammadownload.com/viewtopic.php?t=914> .

³ Dhajagga Sutta - <http://www.accesstosight.org/tipitaka/sn/sn11/sn11.003.than.html> .

While the devotee keeps the string in his hand, with his thumb and index-finger he 'counts', or actually pushes one bead after another toward him, reaching the following beads – and he/she will take hold of each bead only as long as he recites his particular sentence. The extra 'hairy bead' is there to remind the devotee that he has finished his set of sentences and is going to start his recollection from the beginning.



A 108 rosary made of a kind of stone, in a shop near Mingun Pagoda.

Counting beads has been more spread in the previpassanā period of Myanmar (until around a half a century ago), when most people believed that Nibbāna cannot be attained any more. They therefore took refuge in reflecting on Buddha's qualities, expecting deep concentration, and eventually rebirth at the next Buddha's period as humans - ready to become enlightened by mere listening to His discourse. Even today you may see rosary beads hanging on necks of famous Burmese wizards, who took the idea of Nibbāna-no-more very seriously and being afraid of what their next birth might be, they counted the beads so fervently that they gained life-extending powers (but as far as I know, most of them passed away, it seems). The belief here is that after the Buddha's teachings completely disappears, there will be one last moment when a remaining Buddha's relic will shine enormously, attracting many deities to watch. At that auspicious moment

the body of the Buddha will appear and utter Dhamma discourse – enlightening thus myriads of beings. The wizards’ aim is to extend their life-span until that time and become enlightened then and there. The most famous are Bo Bo Aung (maybe 250 years) and Bo Min Kaung (maybe 500 years).



Statue of Bo Bo Aung in front of a village pagoda, near Waw Town (Bago Region).



A statue of Bo Min Kaung owned by a Burmese family.

On the other hand, the Buddha praised reflecting on His qualities again and again. A very interesting account, which interestingly shifts the benefit from *jhānas* (meditation absorptions) to the very attainment of Nibbāna, is that of *Aṅguttara Nikāya 1* :

Aṅguttara Nikāya 1 - 16. Ekadhammapāḷi - 1. Paṭhamavaggo :

“*Ekadhammo, bhikkhave, bhāvito bahulīkato ekantanibbidāya virāgāya nirodhāya upasamāya abhiññāya sambodhāya nibbānāya saṃvattati. Katamo ekadhammo? Buddhānussati. Ayaṃ kho, bhikkhave, ekadhammo bhāvito bahulīkato ekantanibbidāya virāgāya nirodhāya upasamāya abhiññāya sambodhāya nibbānāya saṃvattati*”’ti.”

F.L. Woodward translates this in his “The Book of Gradual Sayings (Anguttara-Nikāya)”, PTS, London, vol.1, p.27 as :

“Monks, there is one thing which, if practiced and made much of, conduces to downright revulsion and disgust, to ending, tranquility, full comprehension, to perfect enlightenment, to Nibbāna. What is that one thing? It is calling to mind the Buddha.”

When I visited the Mandalay Hill last month, on the way back – while descending – I turned left in search for more objects to photograph, and I found a true treasure – a little shop with bead-cutting machine. See the video in this link: <https://youtu.be/6mxrpmEGac0> .

Or just look at these photos extracted from that video:



Beads-Making Machine
downstairs in Mandalay Hill



First phase of drilling (first
side).



Second phase of drilling
(second side), upon which the
beads fall down through a
hole, being collected below.

The drill point is made of two tips – a longer on one side and a shorter on the other side. When rotating, the longer tip makes the beads' central hole, through which the rosary is then strung. The short tip is carving the wood around the central hole.

2. Kyauk Se (ကျောက်ဆည်) – The Enigmatic Fields and The Elephants' Event

"Myanmar Encyclopedia, the Illustrated Bank of Knowledge by Sar-Pe Biman [Publishing House]"

[မြန်မာစာပေတိုက်၊ စာပေဗိမာန်၏ ရုပ်ပြပဟာသုတဘက်], The Myanmar Union of Translations

[မြန်မာနိုင်ငံဘာသာပြန်စာပေအသင်း], 1955, Yangon, vol.2, pp.41-43. (Tr. by monk Sarana, Czech.)

KYAUK SE DISTRICT (ကျောက်ဆည်ခရိုင်)

Kyauk Se district is placed completely in the dry-sky, rare-water area of Mandalay Division. In the north there is the river Myit-Ngay (မြစ်ငယ်မြစ်), in the east there is Shan Division, in the west there is the Myin-Chan (မြင်းခြံ) and Sagaing (စစ်ကိုင်း) districts; in the south there is the Meikthila region. There are three townships in this district, namely Sint-Kaing Township (စဉ့်ကိုင်မြို့နယ်), Kyauk Se Township (ကျောက်ဆည်မြို့နယ်) and the Myit-Thar Township (မြစ်သားမြို့နယ်).

As it is in an area of rare rain, when rain rains, it rains in average to 30 inches. However, thanks to the irrigation channels dug by the kings of ancient Myanmar, even though there is little rain, it is possible to grow (crops) and plant in the fields.

Since the time when king Anawratha (11th century AC) built irrigation channel with nine water-directing holes in that district, eleven villages received water in their fields. The 11 villages of irrigated fields were (1) Pin-Lay (ပင်လယ်), (2) Myit-Mana (မြစ်မနား), (3) Myit-Thar (မြစ်သား), (4) Myin-Khone-Taing (မြင်းခုံတိုင်), (5) Yamone (ယမုန်း), (6) Panan (ပန်), (7) Makhara (မက္ခရာ), (8) Ta-Pyet-Thar (တပြက်သာ), (9) Thin-Taung (သင်တောင်), (10) Tamote-Hsoe (တမုတ်ဆိုး) and (11) Khan-Lu (ခံလူး) villages. Therefore, as is known from Myanmar chronicle, the Kyauk Se District was in olden times called "The Region of Nine(fold) Irrigating," and "The Region of Nine(fold) Water-Directing." In the Region of Nine(fold) Irrigating, there are four portions (ခရိုင်) - Saw-Hla Town (စောလှမြို့), Pin-Lay Town (ပင်လယ်မြို့), Myit-Thar Town (မြစ်သားမြို့), and Pyin-Mana Town (ပျဉ်းမနားမြို့) - connected to the Pan-Laung River (ပန်းလောင်မြစ်), and five portions (ခရိုင်) - Myaung-Hla Town (မြောင်လှမြို့), Myin-Khone-Daing Town (မြင်းခုံတိုင်မြို့), Panan Town (ပန်မြို့), Makhara Town (မက္ခရာမြို့) and Myin-Sain Town (မြင်စိုင်းမြို့) - connected to the Zawgyi River (ဇော်ဂျီမြစ်). In the history of Myanmar, the kings who reigned over these nine field-irrigated portions had abundance of subjects and power. Hence continuous lineages of Myanmar kings protected and cared for that region. At this time, the dug irrigation channels from ancient times and those irrigation channels that were dug later are repaired and managed in a modern way. Thus there are altogether 176 000 acres that may be cultivated.

When comparing Kyauk Se District with the Shan hill-ranges, these hills and high-reaching hill-ranges are a region of equal land-level. However, in the north there is the Yay-Yaman Region

(ရဲယမန်နယ်) dense in hills. The Pan-Laung and Zawgyi Rivers flow from Shan State through Kyauk Se District, irrigating the cultivated silt-islands there and also helps in floating wood-cargo rafts.

The district is 1245 miles² in breadth, and according to the population count of 1941 there were 152 508 people. Two thirds of the population made their living by farming (agriculture). The most thriving parts (of the district) in rice cultivation are the areas between Zawgyi and Zamone (ဇမုန်မြစ်) rivers. In spite of the dry (weather) in the region, because there's water any time obtained from the irrigation channels, and thus because there are cultivated two more (kinds) of fruit, there is no dry (condition) - the district is always fresh and luxuriant district.

The people that live in Kyauk Se District are mostly Burmese, but in the hilly areas there live Dhanu people.

The Yangon-Mandalay railway and the Yangon-Mandalay highway pass through Kyauk Se District, and thus it is possible to visit the little towns and little villages (of the district) easily.

In the hilly areas that is dense in forest, are to be seen pines and oaks. At the foot of the hill one may see ironwood tree (*Xylia dolabriformis*), teak, and other big trees.

The main exported goods of Kyauk Se District, it is rice and legumes. As for the people of whole the western hill-range, they make their living by mining (stones), baking lime (ထုံးဖုတ်), baking charcoal (မီးသွေးဖုတ်), and cutting fire-wood for selling.

In Kyauk Se District there are also growing mangoes. Especially the 'aung-din mangoes' (အောင်ဒင်သရက်) and 'zan-yar mangoes' (ဧရာသရက်) were historically offered to the kings and thus until today known as "mangoes fit for royalty." Aung-din mangoes and zan-yar mangoes are thus named according to (the farmers) Aung Din and Zan Yar, who started to grow them.

There is also an old superstition, that if exactly nine persons walk through these field regions, they may come to a disaster.

KYAUK SE TOWN (ကျောက်ဆည်မြို့)

The Kyauk Se town is built upon the brink of the Zawgyi River's left bank, and it is the central administrative town of the Kyauk Se District. It is a famous town on the Yangon-Mandalay railway, being 27 miles far from Mandalay town and 359 miles from Yangon by the railway.

The town extents 1.05 miles², but the area is in a systematic position. In the Kyauk Se Town there a (part of) the 975 ft tall Shwe Thar Lyaung Hill (ရွှေဘာလျောင်း). At the top of the hill Bagan's king Anawratha (11th century AC) built and worshipped pagoda [named according the hill], and at the foot of the hill (he) built the Shwe-Mote-Thaw Pagoda (ရွှေမုဠာစေတီတော်).

When the irrigation channels were built in the era of king Anawratha, they were constructed from stone, hence the town was then called "Stone-Dam Town" (ကျောက်ဆည်မြို့ [Kyauk-Se Myot]). Because there are installed water-directing holes, it is possible to distribute and share abundance of water to the fields around the town.

The Kyauk Se Town has the greatest population of Kyauk Se District, and in the population count of 1953 there were 8668 people. In 1888 there was founded a municipal unit for management the town's hygiene.

Every year in the month of Thadingyut there is held the festival called 'elephant festival' (ဆင်ပွဲ). The origins of this festival go to the time when Bagan king Anawratha announced in all the irrigated nine portions of fields (in Kyauk Se District) that he is going to pay respects to the pagoda on the Shwe Thar Lyaung Hill. The festival then became a tradition since then. On the 14th day of month Thadingyut's new moon there are built a big images of elephants in the villages near the Kyauk Se Town, and while dancing, jumping, and playing musical instruments, there is a procession with those elephants (moving) into to the town. (In olden times the procession was done with true elephants.) Then, after paying respects to the Shwe Thar Lyaung Pagoda (ရွှေသာလျောင်းစေတီတော်), the crowd separates. It is a large celebration which people of various ages join and joyously celebrate.

May all beings be happy and satisfied :-)

monk Sarana